

# FAMILY FOCUS

## HOW DIVORCE AFFECTS CHILDREN

Debby Johnson\*

Divorce, even under the most agreeable circumstances, frequently leaves victims and scars. While the adults involved often view divorce as a way of ending an unsatisfying personal relationship, many children find it hard to understand divorce and have difficulty adjusting to the effects of divorce. In a child's eyes, divorce is seen and experienced as the breaking up of the family itself rather than of just a marriage. While the marital relationship may not have been satisfying to the partners, the parent-child relationship was probably meeting the child's needs and seemed normal to the child. In other words, the parents were probably able to carry out their roles as mother and father even though the husband/wife roles were suffering and undergoing a great deal of stress while trying to keep the marriage together.

### Children's Reactions Vary

Until recently, very little research has been devoted to divorce, and even less to its effect on children. However, the increasing divorce rate has led researchers, therapists and other family life professionals to investigate the emotional aspects of dissolving a marriage.

One important study of children and divorce was a 5-year research project using many children whose parents were divorcing. Basically, they found that children differ in their understanding of, and adjustment to, a divorce depending on their age. One cannot expect a 4-year-old and a 12-year-old to react alike, and yet for many years all children of divorce were categorized and treated alike. Therapists who worked with children began to realize that just as children have different learning abilities at different ages, their adjustment to divorce also varies with age. Therefore, the child's

age must be considered when helping the child to adjust emotionally to a divorce.

### Adjustment to Divorce By Age

Four age ranges can help us more clearly understand children's perceptions of divorce and their expected behaviors. Keep in mind, however, that these are generalizations and that all children do not fit neatly into an age group just because they are that age. These groupings reflect the age of the child at the time of the divorce.

- **Infants and Toddlers (birth to 3 years):** Infants are largely unaware that the divorce has occurred and have little memory of the original family. Toddlers, ages 2 to 3, may go through regression, such as losing acquired bladder control, excessive crying and irregular sleep habits. Children in this age group usually overcome these problems quickly and have few long-lasting adjustment problems.
- **Preschoolers (approximately ages 3 to 6):** Young children are often quite distressed and upset by a divorce. Their feelings include helplessness, grief, fear, instability and panic. Preschool children usually do not understand the reason for a divorce because their experience with, and beliefs about, a family are not completely formed. A preschooler's ideas of a family and individual roles are relatively rigid: *a family is made up of a mother, father and children who love and care for one another and are usually present.* Divorce shatters this view because the child does not understand how a parent can love a child and yet leave the family. Regression among preschoolers is common. They may whine and fuss, wet the bed, become picky about food, seem uninterested in their toys, have recurrent nightmares and exhibit many other worrisome behaviors. These reactions are the child's way of expressing fear and

\*Former Extension family life education specialist, The Texas A&M University System.

anger about the divorce without using words. Many children have not yet learned how to express emotions in words, so these represent substitutes. This is a mourning process for children, and parents should take care not to criticize or punish the child for this infant-like behavior.



*Preschool children may experience loss of appetite during the divorce process.*

Security, stability and trust are of great value to young children during the period following a divorce. Because the presence of parents has been severely threatened, preschoolers often become anxious when the custodial parent leaves the child with a babysitter to go out. The assurance that children once had that parents will always be with them has been removed, so they become fearful that even the one parent who remains may leave eventually. For this reason, the custodial parent should be sure the children understand that he or she will return.



*Young children of families involved in divorce need assurance that the custodial parent will return.*

Preschool children (and younger school-age children) also may try to blame themselves for the divorce because they are at a "me-centered" stage in their development. They view situations from their point of view and have difficulty understanding another person's needs or problems. For example, consider the child who spills tempera paint on the carpet and makes his/her parents angry. If parents inform the child of a separation or divorce soon after this, the preschooler may feel it is his/her fault and that his/her "naughtiness" or "clumsiness" caused the divorce. The child thus accepts "blame" for the break-up of the family. Of course, this is not the case, but young children may feel they were at fault.

- **Elementary School (approximately ages 6 to 11):** While school-aged children are better able to understand the parent's explanation and reassurances about the divorce, this period is a difficult one for both parents and children. Psychologically, school-aged children are more advanced and sensitive to their parent's actions, particularly if parents are dishonest or bitter about the divorce. Children may try to deny that the divorce is real to help relieve some of their grief, but this is not good for a child's emotional health. Other reactions include regression to infantile behavior, nightmares and stomach aches, hyperactivity, irritability and demanding behavior.



*Grades and homework sometimes suffer after the initial impact of a divorce.*

School-aged children have a deeper understanding of a "family," though their ideas about



roles are generally conventional. For example, mothers cook, fathers mow the lawn, etc. (depending, of course, on what is normal for their particular household). During and after a divorce, children are likely to set up a divided loyalty, pitting one parent against the other. In addition, anger is often directed at siblings, playmates and parents. Many parents get fussed at, blamed and criticized by a child of this age.



*School-aged children may create discipline problems in an effort to re-unite their parents.*

Younger school-aged children (ages 6 and 7) often blame themselves for the breakup of the family. They may feel that their "bad" behavior was the cause, and that being "good" will bring the family back together. Or, school-aged children may try to be troublesome so that the parents will get back together in order to stop the undesirable behavior.

- **Junior High and High School (ages 12 and above):** Adolescents may exhibit more obvious reactions to pain experienced from a divorce than children of other ages. The expected reaction is primarily harsh, critical withdrawal from the parents, possibly for a year or more. It is during this period that the adolescent works through his/her feelings and resolves the divorce.

Most teenagers have a clearer understanding of what a family is, what it does, and the mutual love and understanding it provides for its members. The meanings of love, commitment and mar-



*Following a divorce, teenagers may go through a period of withdrawal from their parents.*

riage are being experienced through their own dating relationships and families are seen as "permanent." Divorce challenges the very foundation of the adolescent's idea of family life. Hence, many adolescents are not likely to identify with or be sympathetic toward divorcing parents. They often criticize, pass judgment and cut themselves off from parents. On the other hand, some adolescents take sides with one parent; others try to reason parents into a reconciliation; some tell each parent in turn that they love him or her the most (an effort to comfort each). The comforting generally follows the withdrawal period previously mentioned.

Divorce is embarrassing to teens, and many will lie to peers and try to keep them from knowing the truth. Adolescents also experience a blow to their self-esteem, feeling they are no good and that no one will ever love them, primarily because their ideas about love and family have been shattered. Consequently, teens are more prone to engage in promiscuous behavior such as drinking, drugs, sexual activity, stealing or missing school during and following the divorce.

## The Parent-Child Relationship Following Divorce

During and following the separation/divorce process, parents should be honest with children

about what is happening and what is to come. In conversations with children, try to separate facts ("Your daddy is moving out") from feelings ("I love your mother and want her to come back home"). Both need to be expressed honestly, and children need to be helped to understand the difference. Children are often more sensitive to feelings than adults realize and hiding true feelings may create more problems.

Consistency in the home can give children an added sense of security in a period marked by insecurity. Some suggestions for doing this include:

- Maintain family routines as they were prior to the divorce, such as meals, shopping, church, guests, etc.
- If possible, maintain housing arrangements or postpone a move to a new neighborhood which would involve the change of schools.
- Use discipline techniques consistent with previous guidelines.
- Maintain friendships, associations and activities to the extent possible.

This continuity or sameness helps children adjust to the divorce. Too many changes at one time leave children with feelings of distrust and insecurity.

Psychologists encourage parents to wait for 6 weeks to 3 months after a divorce before being too specific about the meaning and reasons for the breakup. Prior to this, lives are unsettled, and there are many questions which are unanswered for both parents and children. This "grace period" gives children the chance to understand what is happening and deal with their fears, guilt and/or depression.

Three considerations regarding the parent-child relationship include:

- It is important for the non-custodial parent to maintain contact with children as more problems arise when he/she does not take an interest. Research indicates that divorce is hardest on the child whose non-custodial parent, whether mother or father, lives nearby but does not keep in touch through visits and telephone calls. (This may lead to delinquency among teens.)

- Parents should explain to children what happened to bring about the decision to divorce (facts), their feelings, and how the divorce will affect the family, based on the child's level of understanding. Depending on the specific situation, older children should be given factual, non-judgmental information about the divorce. An honest effort should be made not to blame, criticize or downgrade the former spouse, who, in the child's eyes, is a good parent.
- Parents should keep open lines of communication with their children and be sensitive to their feelings, both expressed and unexpressed. Many emotions and feelings may be unspoken, so it is important to *read between the lines*. Parents and children can support and help one another through the transition into separation, divorce and single parenthood.

Finally, it takes 3 to 3½ years for spouses to emotionally divorce each other and have no further interest in what the former spouse is doing. Up until that time, the marriage remains unresolved. These 3 years are a significant proportion of a child's life and can make him/her vulnerable to emotional stresses. A parent's understanding and honest approach to the divorce can help a child cope with the situation and retain inner strength and stability.

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